

The Jazz Education of Armen Donelian '72

BY JAMIE KATZ '72, '80 BUSINESS

It stands to reason that an artist as self-aware as pianist and composer **Armen Donelian '72** would be generous in acknowledging the mentors who pointed him toward a place of excellence. And indeed, he is: "Because I've been fortunate to have good teachers in my life, I feel a responsibility," Donelian says, seated in a tiny practice room at New Jersey's William Paterson University, where he has taught for many years. He also teaches at The New School in Manhattan and is frequently called upon to give master classes in conservatories overseas.

Donelian has performed with such jazz luminaries as Sonny Rollins, Mongo Santamaria, Chet Baker, Lionel Hampton, Paquito D'Rivera and Billy Harper. He has recorded 12 albums as a leader, most recently *Leapfrog*, on Sunnyside Records. He has been awarded numerous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and is a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Switzerland, Scandinavia and his ancestral Armenia. He leads the Hudson Jazz Workshop, a summer program in upstate New York, where he lives with his wife, Rose Caldwell, a travel consultant and part-time chef. Yet for all his individual accomplishment and the years of solitary dedication it required, Donelian always speaks of those who showed him the way.

The story begins in the 1950s in Armonk, N.Y., where his parents surrounded the four Donelian children with Armenian, Turkish and Greek music as well as classical and jazz. By 5, Donelian was playing a beat-up upright in the basement. At 7, he

began weekly lessons at the Music Conservatory of Westchester, studying classical piano with Austrian émigré Michael Pollon for 12 years. Donelian's older brother played clarinet in a Dixieland-swing band led by Arthur Ryerson, who had worked with Louis Armstrong. When Donelian was 12, he heard the Ryerson band at a Methodist church bazaar, and was smitten. "That's it!" he thought. "I've got to play *this* music." Before long he was in the band himself. His first gig, for \$5 and all the ice cream he could eat, was at the 1964 World's Fair in Queens.

In 1968, Donelian came to Columbia, where he majored in music and studied with composers Charles Wuorinen '61, '63 GSAS and Harvey Sollberger '64 GSAS, among other leading lights. "I took 16th-century counterpoint with Vladimir Ussachevsky, who was one of the higher-ups in the electronic

music world, so that was kind of ironic," Donelian says.

Jazz education was not something Columbia offered for credit back then. Still, he could learn plenty by transcribing John Coltrane solos or listening to Bill Evans from the steps of the Village Vanguard. Donelian also played in a talented lab band in the basement of Dodge Hall, led by the brilliant alto saxophonist and pianist Marc Copland '70. Sam Morrison '73 also played in the group; a few years later he was with Miles Davis. Meanwhile, Donelian worked evenings at The King's Table, a restaurant nestled within John Jay Hall, playing solo piano while the young gentlemen of the College dined in style. Unlike the student cafeteria just steps away, The King's Table even had tablecloths.

"Armen is a great player and he's a sweetheart — absolutely one of the good guys in the business," Copland says today. As students, he remembers,

they would improvise sophisticated duets in a two-piano practice room in Dodge. "Once we monkeyed around and played a mock classical duet in the style of Beethoven. We went on for five or 10 minutes and then fell off the piano benches, laughing."

After graduation, Donelian played with a country rock band and, on Copland's recommendation, began studying privately with renowned pianist Richie Beirach. "He opened the door to me, combining the harmony of contemporary music — Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky and Berg — with jazz," Donelian says. In 1975, legendary Latin jazz percussionist and bandleader Mongo Santamaria auditioned

Donelian to fill the piano chair once occupied by such world-class players as Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. Though he did not have experience playing Afro-Cuban jazz, Donelian got the gig and was on his way.

Donelian has distilled much of the wisdom gleaned from four decades of professional experience into his latest instructional book: *Whole Notes: A Piano Masterclass*, which takes up such basic matters as posture, practice routines, mental health, body awareness and the physics of playing piano. "The book is about how to practice as well as what to practice," Donelian says. The holistic approach extends to personal revelation; he discusses such painful episodes as the loss of his parents, a bitter divorce and a nearly career-ending hand injury he suffered when he lost his temper during an argument in 1991. "Ultimately, it's all about expressing what's inside through the instrument, so that there's a kind of a conduit, an effortless conduit for these ideas and feelings to proceed from conception to realization."

Asked for the advice he might give a talented student who worries about pursuing jazz as a career, Donelian says, "I remember when I was studying with Richie Beirach, he said, 'Do what you love and you'll make a living from it.' There are a lot of people out there making lots of money, but they don't love what they do. And ultimately in life, if you want to be happy, if that's something of value to you, then you should give that your first priority."

Go to armenjazz.com for Donelian's performance dates, sound clips and more.

Former CCT editor **Jamie Katz '72, '80 Business**, previously jazz director of WKCR radio, writes for Smithsonian Magazine and other publications.



Armen Donelian '72 at sunset, facing west, in his music studio in Hudson, N.Y., where he also hosts the annual Hudson Jazz Workshop.

PHOTO: DAVID LEE